

US' Interest Shifting as a Response to China's Move in Cuba

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses why the United States changed his foreign policy toward Cuba under the leadership of Barack Obama. The United States normalized its relations with Cuba, which were very troubled previously, during the Obama administration. Martha Finnemore's concept of the national interest is applied to explain why the behavior of the state is very dependent on the country's interaction with its environment to promote its national interest. The state as a foreign policy actor remains a major political unit in the international relations system, although non-state actors have increasingly important roles in international relations. This paper tries to understand the factors underlying the U.S. government shift in policy toward Cuba by using variables based upon the values, norms, and goals of the United States. The results of the analysis indicate that U.S. economic interests require protection from China's proximity to Cuba.

Keywords: *U.S.-Cuba Relations, Normalization of U.S.-Cuba Relations, Reaching Out to the Cuban People Policy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The bad relations between the United States and Cuba have a long history, especially since President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush worsened relations between these two countries by imposing sanctions via the US embargo. However, President Obama developed a new resolution on relations between these two countries through his policy of Reaching Out to Cuban People. In his efforts to build a new relationship with Cuba, President Obama confronted obstacles within the US and other external factors such as the Cuban academic group's perspective, who suspected the US of promoting its own interests in its efforts to rebuild relations with Cuba.

Obama initiated efforts to improve relations with Cuba through direct diplomacy from the beginning of his campaign ("U.S.-Cuba Relations | Council on Foreign Relations," n.d.). After being elected, Obama began loosening the rules that forbade US citizens from traveling to Cuba and sending money. In the meantime, the Cuban President Raul Castro also began to decentralize the agricultural sector, ease restrictions on small businesses, and liberalize the real estate market, all of which made it easier for Cubans to get permission to travel abroad. Eventually, a secret diplomatic agreement

between the two countries was brokered by Pope Francis, where both parties agreed to exchange prisoners, including Cuban intelligence officers and American development contractors, among other concessions ("US-Cuba Relations | Council on Foreign Relations," nd).

On January 14, 2014, President Obama issued the Reaching Out to the Cuban People policy which regulated deliberate travel, non-family remittances, and US airports that support licensed charter flights to and from Cuba ("Reaching Out to the Cuban People | Whitehouse .gov," nd). The policy was expected to improve people-to-people relations, and increase the free flow of information to and from Cuba. The policy was a continuation of Obama's commitment to improve relations with Cuba. This policy was expected to improve relations between these two countries at the government level, as well as deep down in each society.

This ongoing effort resulted in the reopening of the two countries' embassies in July 2015 ("Timeline: U.S.-Cuba Relations," n.d.). The United States and Cuban embassies, which had been closed since 1961, were reopened. However, the US trade embargo could not be revoked without congressional approval and remains valid. The US diplomat stationed in Havana is the chargé d'affaires, Jeffrey DeLaurentis. Meanwhile, the Cuban

foreign minister Bruno Rodriguez oversaw the reopening of the Cuban embassy in Washington (Spetalnick, M, 2015). In early 2016, the culmination of improved relations between Cuba and the US resulted in President Obama's visit to Havana after Cuba and the US signed an agreement to permit commercial flights between the two countries for the first time in more than fifty years ("Timeline: US-Cuba Relations," nd; "US-Cuba Relations | Council on Foreign Relations," and).

Despite the improvement of relations between these two countries, theoretically informed academic research studies have been conducted frequently by both US and Cuban researchers, while this paper addresses the external aspects of US policies designed to improve relations with Cuba. Many previous studies that have discussed this phenomenon have been conducted from three major perspectives, including (1) political economy; (2) domestic politics; and (3) security politics.

Political-economic studies see improved relations between the US and Cuba as a method for attracting US tourists to Cuba (Fullerton, Kendrick, & Broyles, 2017), and developing an interest in traveling to Cuba among US adults (Fullerton, Kendrick, & Broyles, 2019). Collaboration between the US and Cuba in the acceptance and regulation of many private activities (Henken & Vignoli, 2015) has been understood as an attempt to overthrow the Cuban communist regime (Wilkinson, 2017). Others have commented on how media coverage and social media content play the main role in influencing public knowledge and attitudes toward Cuba as a country (Fullerton et al., 2017).

From a domestic political perspective, the success and failure of US foreign policy during the Obama administration (Unger, 2016) fueled resistance to increasingly strong economic reforms, caused by fear that Obama's charm attacks, combined with a strengthened entrepreneurial sector, would damage all revolutionary projects in Cuba (Bye, 2016). Obama's policy toward Latin America was viewed as a form of obfuscation of the revised strategy and assumptions of George W. Bush (Buxton, 2011). Obama's failure to disguise US military initiatives inherited the neoconservative environment from George W. Bush without changing any of the US government's strategic goals (Gandasegui, 2011).

Political-security perspectives try to understand the US failure to influence Cuban society and academics have used the liberal organization model to investigate US hegemony (Sarmiento, 2014). Smart strategies have been used to stabilize US influence in Cuba (Salazar, 2011). Some studies describe the persistence of hostile US policies from 1959 to 2014 and the policy changes announced by President Barack Obama in December 2014 (LeoGrande, 2011) in terms of the differences between Cuba's and North Korea's relations with the United States, because they have both been subject to similar US sanctions (Lee & Park, 2016).

Previous studies' arguments about improving US and Cuban relations can be summarized as follows. Efforts to improve relations between the US and Cuba are a continuation of the efforts of the US government in their determination to influence the government ideology in Cuba following the failure of previous policies. Improved relations between the US and Cuba became a continuation of the failure of sanctions and the embargo used by the US government to overthrow Cuba, by forcing them to implement a democratic political system. Following the reopening of relations between the US and Cuba through economic cooperation encouraged by the flow of globalization, it was hoped that the exchange of information and interaction at every level of Cuban society would develop an openness to democracy.

On the other hand, studies that observed improving relations between the US and Cuba from the perspective of the dynamics of domestic politics in the United States saw this policy as a failure of the government. President Obama was considered to have failed to maintain the strategies and assumptions of former leaders. For Cuba, the policy was a setback because economic reform would only damage the entire revolutionary project in Cuba. However, from a political economy perspective, improving relations between the US and Cuba provided Cuba with an opportunity to open and develop markets in the US tourism sector, while for the United States, Cuba's new economic openness provided an investment opportunity.

Based on the perspectives discussed above, improving relations between the US and Cuba provided a more favorable agenda for the US, and its efforts to spread democracy and open markets by improving its relations with Cuba. Improved relations removed previous economic constraints by lifting sanctions imposed by the US embargo. Therefore, improving relations between the US and Cuba was mutually beneficial for both countries. This collaboration did not completely eliminate the US embargo on Cuba, but the efforts of the two governments were able to provide an initial foundation for improved long-term relations between the US and Cuba. Basically, the improvement of the relationship required confidence-building measures (CBM), which are developed gradually and consistently due to their long-term orientation. CBM aim at the root of the problem to rebuild trust throughout every level of society.

Based on the series of descriptions and arguments above, the basic question of this paper is: why did the United States aim to improve relations with Cuba in 2009? Using Finnemore's concept of the national interest, this paper tries to explain the reasons behind the US change in attitude toward Cuba as a consequence of changing interests in the United States. This theory explains that the state can have many identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors.

Identity is a representation of the actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn signifies their interests. This is important because Finnemore argues that identity expresses both an interest and action (Mc, Walters, & Scheinpfug, n.d.).

Constructivist theories of international relations provide a tool to conceptualize national interests (Glanville, 1996). This re-conceptualization confirms the validity of previous knowledge and allows us to place it in a broader theoretical framework. Social constructivist theories talk about national interests and suggest that substantive content is not a given. The ethical construction of the national interest prohibits the use of this term as a moral justification for state action.

Constructivist literature includes great ontological and epistemological variations; however, such thought proposes that values and ideas have an impact on international relations through identity, interests, and actions that may be socially constructed, and can change systems, norms, and relations. Finnemore states that previous theories arguing that states seek power, security, and wealth were true, but that these were intended as goals. The state must decide which goals and values must be pursued. Objectives and values that comprise the substantive content of national interest are decided and built through social interaction with other countries (Glanville, 1996).

This research uses a qualitative approach. Data was collected from literature studies and other documents. Existing statistics were analyzed in this study, which means that the author used pre-existing data, such as reports from related parties and the media. The validity and reliability of data was tested by triangulation. This research was exploratory. In this qualitative study, the writer conducted an analysis and evaluation of the phenomena concerned, by focusing on the issues raised. This aimed to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question.

2. DISCUSSION

This paper describes the behavioral shift between the United States and Cuba according to two main variables; social values and international structure. Using these variables, this paper explains how interactions between actors influenced the United States interest in Cuba. This shift in interests ultimately changed the United States of America's behavior toward Cuba, demonstrated by the emergence of friendlier policies toward Cuba.

2.1. International Structure

International structures help to explain how interactions between countries are influenced by social structures in the international order. By understanding the international structure, we can map how interactions between countries occur and why.

2.1.1. U.S Position in the Global Order

The US has a very powerful position in the international order. Since its victory in the Second World War, the US has occupied the top position in the global order, alongside the Soviet Union during the Cold War. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the US became the only superpower in the international system.

However, in 2006, the US economy slowed down (Weller, n.d.). As a result, there was an increase in US citizen household debt, an increase in imports which exceeded exports, and a surge in US government debt to foreign governments. In addition, the involvement of the US in various long-term wars, some of which did not end until 2010, including conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, became another problem that worsened the US position in the international structure. These things led to a decline in the US position which was previously a superpower. Now the US has become a country that is in debt to other countries.

2.1.2. China's Position in the Global Order

During the Cold War, China was in a pretty bad position, especially due to the Sino-Soviet Split. China's position at that time was also exacerbated by the war in Vietnam in early 1979 (Sullivan, n.d.) and the Taiwan crisis since the 1950s ("Milestones: 1953–1960-Office of the Historian," n.d.).

However, over time, China overcame adversity and became a global power. In his speech in 2005, US Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick implied the recognition of Beijing as an emerging power ("U.S. Relations with China 1949–2018," n.d.). The Chinese economy continued to improve until it finally became the largest US creditor in 2008. This rise in China's position in the international structure provided the country with a better bargaining position when achieving its goals.

2.1.3. Cuba's Position in the Global Order

Cuba's decision to side with the Soviet Union became one of the main problems for the US. In response, the US labeled Cuba a sponsor of terrorism in 1982 ("U.S.-Cuba Relations | Council on Foreign Relations," n.d.). However, it did not stop even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Cuba lost its strongest allies.

The end of the Cold War forced Cuba to open up to potential cooperation with other countries that could also help Cuba. This effort entailed establishing cooperation with other countries from Latin America and also China.

2.2. Social Values

Social values refer to how the state sees itself and the international system where other countries influence each

other. It is a country's social values that determine how it will behave in the international system.

2.2.1. *United States and Cuba*

It is important to understand how the United States sees itself and views Cuba, before discussing interactions between these countries and any changes that occurred during these interactions. United States' public diplomacy describes the country as a freedom fighter for democracy that aims to spread the values of freedom and democracy throughout the world (Kennedy & Lucas, 2005).

The inclement history between the United States and Cuba is based upon the United States' frustration of Cuba's struggle for freedom from Spanish colonialism. Cuba then embraced the oppositional ideology of communism which eventually led to the US perception of Cuba as a threat. Due to the geographical location of the two countries, the United States was the real threat. This was evidenced by the deterioration of relations between these two countries during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 ("Cuban Missile Crisis," n.d.). When Cuba won independence from Spain after winning the Battle of San Juan Hill with the United States in 1898, the US became a patron of Cuba (Nelson, 2019). However, after independence, Cuba faced many national security threats, not from other countries, but from rebels who emerged within Cuba itself. From 1906 to 1952 Cuba struggled with a dictatorial regime. Fidel Castro led the Cuban revolution in 1953, then institutionalized communism and nationalized all businesses in Cuba, including US businesses, before becoming an ally of the Soviet Union (Rumbaut & Rumbaut, 2009). The failure of the Pig Bay Invasion planned by the United States to overthrow Castro in 1961, culminated in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

This event indicated the United States' mistrust of Cuba. The US viewed Cuba as a threat to the ideology of democracy and freedom that the US promoted through its public diplomacy worldwide. Relations between the United States and Cuba from 1898 until the Cuban missile crisis indicated that they were on opposite sides. Cuba was considered a threat because it did not accept US values. Therefore, the United States aimed to frustrate Cuba's development through imposing embargoes and other restrictions. The aim was to convince the world that US values and norms were the only way a country could guarantee prosperity for its people. Should a country reject these values, then they too would suffer like Cuba.

2.2.2. *US and China*

Relations between United States and China have a long history, but this paper limits discussion to the period since President Nixon visited China in 1972. President Richard Nixon spent eight days in China in February

1972 to meet Mao Zedong and sign the *Shanghai Communiqué* ("US Relations With China 1949—2018," nd). The communiqué provided a foundation for improving relations between China and the United States in order to discuss difficult issues such as Taiwan. However, the improvement of relations between two countries was slow and tended not to yield significant results. The presence of the United States in China basically conveyed the same spirit as the country did toward Cuba. The United States visited China to promote the values of democracy and freedom, especially by trying to free China from the influence of communism and free Taiwan from mainland China in the spirit of democracy and self-determination.

Following the United States' unsuccessful efforts to improve relations with China, the country continued its attempts under President Jimmy Carter in 1979. President Jimmy Carter gave full diplomatic recognition to China, while also recognizing China's One China principle and breaking formal relations with Taiwan ("US Relations with China 1949—2018," nd). The Deputy Prime Minister of China, Deng Xiaoping, who led China's massive economic reforms, visited the United States sometime after the event. However, in April, Congress approved the Taiwan Relations Act, which permitted the continuation of trade and cultural relations between the United States and Taiwan. The law also required the Washington government to provide defensive weapons to Taiwan, which did not officially violate the US One China policy.

The US effort to liberate Taiwan did not stop there, but was resumed by President Reagan in 1982. The Reagan government issued "Six Guarantees" to Taiwan, including a promise that it would respect the Taiwan Relations Act and would not mediate conflicts between Taiwan and China. In addition, it did not provide a time limit on the cessation of arms sales to Taiwan ("US Relations with China 1949—2018," nd). However, the Reagan administration in August 1982 signed a third joint communiqué with the People's Republic of China to normalize relations ("US Relations with China 1949—2018," nd). This reaffirmed the US commitment to its One China policy. Reagan's government worked to improve relations between Beijing and Washington to alleviate US concerns about Soviet expansion. President Reagan visited China in April 1984 and again in June, to permit Beijing to purchase military equipment from the United States.

The United States' struggle to free Taiwan finally succeeded in 1996 with the election of Lee Teng-hui from a pro-independence nationalist party ("U.S. Relations with China 1949—2018," n.d.). When President Bill Clinton signed the U.S.-China Relations Act in 2000, it normalized trade relations between these two countries permanently ("U.S. Relations with China 1949—2018," n.d.). The agreement also opened the way

for China to join the World Trade Organization in 2001. In addition, US-China trade rose from \$5 billion to \$231 billion between 1980 and 2004 ("U.S. Relations with China 1949—2018," n.d.). In 2006, China surpassed Mexico as the second largest trading partner of the United States, after Canada.

China's economic success eventually led to the country being the largest US foreign creditor. In September 2008, China surpassed Japan to become the largest US debt holder, which is around \$600 billion ("U.S. Relations with China 1949—2018," n.d.). The growing interdependence between the US and Chinese economies became stronger when the financial crisis threatened the global economy, which triggered fears of an economic imbalance between the United States and China. Finally, China became the largest economy in the world in 2010. This long history maps the change in direction of the United States' interests in China. At first, the presence of the United States in China aimed to spread the values of democracy and freedom through its support of Taiwanese self-determination. However, after this goal was achieved, the United States invited China to become a potential trading partner. Finally, China's power could no longer be controlled by the United States.

The new presence of China as the world's most powerful economy and its success as the largest US foreign creditor, has changed the interactions between the two countries. As a result, the United States' interests in China, which initially tried to spread the values of democracy and freedom, turned into an effort to maintain influence of the United States as a superpower, especially in economic terms.

2.2.3. Interaction between China and Cuba in the United States Perspective

China prioritized Cuba as a major partner in Latin America, and has surged rapidly to become the third largest trading partner in Latin America after Venezuela and Spain (Erikson, n.d.). China's interest in Cuba has led to frequent high-level meetings, and a series of economic and exchange cooperation agreements that have developed in the sectors of science, technology, and defense. China even invested millions of dollars in Cuba to help secure needed commodities such as nickel and agricultural products, and has become a strong supporter of Cuba's position in international forums such as the United Nations. The emergence of China as a world economic power has greatly benefited the Cuban economy and is an important component of the country's economic planning.

China and Cuba began signing trade agreements in December 1959 (Zuo, n.d.). Furthermore, both countries signed trade agreements and several trade contracts in July 1960. Cuba issued Havana's first declaration on September 2, 1960, when Fidel Castro declared the

establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (Zuo, n.d.). A joint communiqué between China and Cuba was issued on September 28, 1960 when the two countries established official diplomatic relations. Former Chinese President Liu Shaoqi said that Cuba provided great political support to China at the time, because it was the first country to recognize the People's Republic of China.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, relations between these two countries gradually strengthened. High-level visits from both sides increased, and the two countries supported each other in international affairs following the ideological differences between China and the Soviets, while at that time Cuba preferred to co-exist with the Soviet Union (Zuo, n.d.). Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and the Cuban foreign minister exchanged diplomatic visits in 1989. Cuba has also continued to adjust its diplomatic policies to improve and strengthen its relations with China since the 1990s. Relations between Cuba and China have continued to grow in the 21st century. High-level visits from both parties have occurred more frequently during this period. President Jiang Zemin visited Cuba again in April 2001, and both parties signed seven important agreements, including economic and technical cooperation agreements. In November 2001, Prime Minister Li Peng visited Cuba which was then reciprocated by President Fidel Castro visiting China from February to March 2003, until in the end President Hu Jintao visited Cuba and signed sixteen trade agreements with Cuba in November 2004 (Zuo, n.d.). China continues to make efforts to further deepen relations between Cuba and China. President Hu Jintao also revisited Cuba after attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting held in November 2008 in Peru.

Latin America and the Caribbean offered many natural resources including copper, oil and grain to support the expansion in China's manufacturing industries. China saw its trade with Latin America rise from \$13 billion in 2000 to more than \$100 billion in 2007 (Zuo, n.d.). At the same time, Latin America and the Caribbean have their value as important market destinations for Chinese goods and a location for Chinese construction companies. Indubitably, improving the transportation infrastructure to facilitate the export of natural resources has become part of China's strategy (MacDonald, n.d.). Latin America was an area used to strengthen China's foreign policy goals, including securing Taiwan's international isolation and developing strategic alliances to support China's global position as a superpower (MacDonald, n.d.).

The increasing role of China in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially in increasing its economic capability, is of particular concern for United States. Due to these events, Latin America, especially Cuba, has developed great economic potential. Therefore, the

United States has great potential if it is willing to improve its relationship with Cuba by relinquishing sanctions and market restrictions. In addition, by improving its relationship with Cuba, the United States also has an opportunity to limit China's rise to become a superpower.

Interactions between these actors changed the United States' view of its national interest. This shift in the national interest was caused by interactions between and with other actors. This also affected the way the United States perceived Cuba which led it to change its behavior.

3. CONCLUSION

The discussion above explains how the national interest can change depending on how a country interacts with its environment. Additionally, a shift in the national interest also leads to changes in state behavior and interactions with other states. Relations between the United States and Cuba have changed following the rise of China, which is now the world's largest economic power.

The ever-changing relations between United States and China and the closeness between China and Cuba have resulted in the United States feeling cornered. In anticipation of Chinese domination of Latin America, especially in Cuba, the United States tried to change its views and open diplomatic relations with Cuba while still prioritizing the values of democracy and freedom. However, today, United States' values are not as strong and firm as they once were because they have been compromised.

Thus, the transformation in the United States behavior toward Cuba was influenced by a shift in the national interest. This occurred due to the interaction between China and Cuba. Therefore, the substantive content of competing national interests in these interactions were decided and built through social interactions between other countries.

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